A/AC.172/1994/CRP.6
8 August 1994

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMITTEE ON CONFERENCES
Substantive session of 1994
22-31 August 1994
Agenda item 5*

COMPREHENSIVE STUDY ON CONFERENCE SERVICES

I. INTRODUCTION

1. In paragraph 42 of its resolution 48/228 II of 23 December 1994, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General:

> "To submit to the General Assembly at its forty-ninth session a comprehensive study on the organization, management and human resources requirements for the provision of adequate conference services as a basis for the consideration of his proposals for the regular budget for the biennium 1996-1997."

The study requested has been undertaken with the assistance of an independent consultant engaged by the Department of Administration and Management.

2. The first phase of the study was carried out primarily through interviews, supplemented by the review of a wide range of documentation, including prior studies of conference services. Several issues relating to the organization, management and staffing of conference services at United Nations Headquarters were identified, including performance measurement and improvement, demand forecasting, workflow management, technology, relationships with both customers

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* A/AC.172/154/Add.1.

and suppliers and major factors affecting the quality, timeliness, productivity and cost-effectiveness of conference services. These issues are being studied in greater detail in the second phase of the comprehensive study, and measures to improve performance will be initiated.

3. A draft annotated outline of the report on the findings and recommendations of the review, to be submitted to the General Assembly at its forty-ninth session, is presented below for the consideration of the Committee. The present report is intended to inform the Committee on Conferences of the results of the first phase of the study and seek its views on actions being undertaken or proposed for the second phase. The views of the Committee will be taken into account in the second phase and in preparing the final text of the report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly.

II. DRAFT ANNOTATED OUTLINE OF THE REPORT

4. As requested by the General Assembly, the report will concentrate on the organization, management and human resources requirements for the provision of adequate conference services. Following an introduction describing the scope and focus of the study, separate sections will present the study's findings and recommendations in each of the three areas specified by the General Assembly; the final section of the report will highlight action to be taken to implement the recommendations, if approved by the General Assembly.

A. Introduction

Definitions

5. At the outset, a working definition of "adequate conference services" will be proposed. Conference services are not an end in themselves; they are a means of permitting intergovernmental and expert bodies to carry out their work and achieve their objectives. Therefore, conference services might be considered adequate if they provide Member States with the facilities and services necessary for them to meet in accordance with the approved calendar and to conduct deliberations on the matters they wish to consider.

6. The study is based on the following definition of conference-servicing performance:

> "The cost-effective use of limited substantive and technical resources by the Secretariat to provide high-value information in all official languages to users of United Nations documents, and to help United Nations bodies to achieve their objectives."

It also recognizes that the task of providing adequate conference services requires maintaining an optimal balance among quality, timeliness and efficiency. In the short term, trade-offs may be necessary, although the longer-term objective is to improve all three.

Performance criteria

7. The criteria for measuring conference-servicing performance are being reviewed as part of the second phase of the study, and an effort will be made to develop new, more appropriate measures. These issues will be considered in detail in the section of the report dealing with the management of conference-servicing resources.

B. Organization of conference services

Objective

8. The objective of organizational arrangements to provide conference services is to respond effectively and efficiently to the requirements of both the users of such services and the suppliers of the substantive materials to be considered in meetings and conferences. Organizational arrangements should also encourage close cooperation among all Secretariat units responsible for any aspect of conference servicing. Conference service performance improvement efforts must therefore go beyond the Office of Conference and Support Services to include cooperation on the part of other branches of the Secretariat, especially author departments and committee secretaries.

Analysis of present organizational structure

9. Conference Services is now organized by function, with an organizational unit established to deal with each aspect of conference servicing. This structure brings the benefits of specialization but runs the risk of compartmentalization. When the activities of Conference Services, author departments and committee secretaries and the relationships among them and with representatives of Member States (especially committee chairmen and bureau members) are considered as a series of "customer-supplier" relationships and transactions that facilitate the achievement of the objectives of United Nations bodies, it appears that Conference Services would benefit from closer contact and more information exchange with both its suppliers and its customers. Author departments are "suppliers" of substantive materials (manuscripts) to which Conference Services "adds value" (by editing, translation, copy preparation, text-processing, reproduction and distribution) for the "customers" (representatives of Member States, users of publications). Committee secretaries also provide services to customers (representatives) by assisting intergovernmental bodies with their work programme and by representing the interests and requirements of those bodies to author departments and the Office of Conference and Support Services.

Proposals for improvement

10. Proposals for giving greater emphasis to close cooperation with suppliers and customers are being considered as part of the second phase of the study, including the possibility of designating some staff members of Conference Services to act as "account managers" for selected intergovernmental bodies and their related author departments. Such account managers would not duplicate the functions of committee secretaries and document coordinators in substantive

departments but would complement them in ways useful to Conference Services in planning its work and in serving its customers better. This function might be part of the Office of the Director of Conference Services; it might incorporate functions of Documents Control and Meetings Planning as well as the "account manager" functions.

11. Another proposal under study relating to the Office of the Director is the addition of a performance improvement function to help the many sections and work groups of Conference Services to develop the capacity for continuous improvement.

C. Management of conference services

Objective

12. The essence of managing conference service performance is maintaining an optimal balance among the quality, timeliness and cost-effectiveness of the services. The challenge on a day-to-day basis is to make the right choices while constantly trading off between quality, cost and timeliness. As indicated above, this implies being aware of customers' needs and priorities for each product and service provided. The long-term management challenge is to perfect systems and practices in order to improve overall quality, timeliness and efficiency.

Analysis of present arrangements

Workload statistics

13. The statistics currently reported by Conference Services have been found to be inadequate for managing conference service performance or reporting it within the Secretariat or to Member States, and one of the projects being initiated during the second phase of the study is the development of better performance indicators that give information on demand as well as output and monitor improvements in quality, timeliness and productivity.

14. The current workload statistics cover only work completed, not incoming workload or "demand". For documentation, the volume of work processed is reported, but not the volume of documentation submitted for processing. Similarly, the numbers of meetings serviced, with or without interpretation, are reported, but not the total numbers of meetings requested. As a result, levels of demand for conference services are probably underestimated in current statistics. Since there are no measures of aggregate demand for services, there is inadequate analysis of whether the demand for services has exceeded the capacity of Conference Services to supply them. The Secretariat is now engaged in the development of simpler forms of workload and productivity measures that would be easier for representatives to understand, more meaningful to customers and better measures of the ability of Conference Services to meet the demands. At present, there are also no aggregate measures of quality or timeliness, and an effort will be made to develop these as well.

15. Another disadvantage to the approaches used by Conference Services to measure outputs is that they may not reveal the nature of apparent productivity changes and internal performance differences among units with similar functions. For this reason, their usefulness for identifying performance improvement opportunities is limited. For its internal reporting, the Office of Conference and Support Services will therefore seek to identify specific management uses of performance data, such as improving resource allocation decisions, improving teamwork, or reducing repeat work, and tailor its performance reporting to those issues. For both external and internal reporting, measures of demand compared with actual work completed would be useful. Information on the nature of requests not met, as well as measures of backlogs that are growing or being reduced would also be useful.

Teamwork

16. The ability of Conference Services to meet demand depends upon teamwork among its own work units and within the Secretariat. Teamwork is encouraged and generally works; however, none of the conference services measurement approaches analyses team performance, and managers and staff may focus so much on immediate production that opportunities to improve teamwork may be missed. This is especially important because problems in the many internal customer-supplier transactions of Conference Services can remain hidden, masking extra work that may be required because one work unit did not provide its work product to the next unit in the best possible form. To ensure an effective and single-minded confluence of goals in serving intergovernmental bodies, it is important to improve teamwork at all levels: within the Office of Conference and Support Services, within the Department of Administration and Management and within the Secretariat as a whole.

17. In the course of the first phase of the current study of conference services, the need for close cooperation on the part of Conference Services with the substantive secretariats and the author departments from the initial stages of preparation of a document was emphasized as essential to the timely issuance of the document. Accurate advance information concerning the number, complexity and length of documents to be submitted to an intergovernmental or expert body, and the dates on which such documents will be submitted for processing, is required by the Office of Conference and Support Services. Unfortunately, this information is often not available, and there is an obvious need to improve the discipline with which procedures are followed and deadlines are met. The first phase study found that, although there may be reasonable coordination among document focal point managers in substantive departments, coordinating units, such as the General Assembly Secretariat Services Branch in the Department of Political Affairs and the Division for Policy Coordination and Economic and Social Council Affairs in the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development, and Documents Control in the Office of Conference and Support Services, such coordination is much too late for the teamwork and goal conformance needed throughout the United Nations to begin. It must start, at a minimum, with the authors of documents and must be supported by the managers of author departments.

Workload standards

18. The present set of workload standards used by the Office of Conference and Support Services may not be the most effective way to encourage improvement of services. It may be more effective to use a system of "benchmarking", under which the various services would make systematic comparisons and help each other to identify the best practices, which they could all adopt. Since benchmarking units compare processes and practices as well as performance, there could be good opportunities for even the highest performing unit to improve. During the second phase of the study, a system of benchmarking will be developed as a possible replacement for workload standards in the management of conference services.

Cost accounting

19. Effective management of conference-servicing resources requires an accurate knowledge of their costs. There is a recognized need for better cost information on a per-meeting and per-document basis, providing a more complete picture of the total costs involved, including overhead and all support costs. Better full-cost information is needed for different modes of work and for different workflows. Also, not enough is understood about the effects on costs of the addition of work to or removal of work from the processing chain in Conference Services. Factors that cause different amounts of work to be done should be examined, and the resulting cost and time differences calculated. This should assist in the identification of opportunities to reduce costs by eliminating repeat work and removing work from the conference-servicing processes.

Proposals for improvement

Demand forecasting

Documentation

20. The preparation of documents is a long process that begins with the intergovernmental bodies themselves when they establish their agendas and decide what documents are needed for each agenda item. It is essential at this stage that the Secretariat understand clearly the purposes to be served by each document so that the drafters can take fully into account all the requirements of the bodies concerned. On the other hand, far too often author departments fail to inform intergovernmental or expert bodies, at the time they adopt resolutions or decisions requesting reports, whether the documents requested can in fact be prepared in time for a given meeting.

21. Authors and their managers must be especially aware of the timeliness imperative and of the need to forecast realistic submission dates, and adhere to them with strict discipline. In this connection, they must realize the importance of completing all steps in the reporting process - including reviews and clearances - in time for meeting submission deadlines and of giving plenty of advance notice when it is clear that deadlines will be missed. Any useful forecasting and advance scheduling of Conference Services' documentation workload must involve realistic deadlines for authors, an earnest effort on the

part of all authors and their managers to meet deadlines, much earlier notice of changes in submission dates and accuracy and timeliness in forecasts and changes in forecasts. One approach to providing better advance information is for authors and their managers to project dates of key milestones before submission (completion of field research, receipt of responses from Member States, policy clearance of draft). The Office of Conference and Support Services would receive reports on when those milestones are achieved or missed, and the impact of missing milestones on final submission dates. Reporting could be done electronically using project management or database software.

22. As part of the second phase of the comprehensive review, an analysis is being made of the actual patterns of incoming manuscripts and the time required for processing. A pilot project is being carried out in cooperation with a submitting department to explore methods for project planning of documentation preparation to establish realistic milestones prior to submission to Conferences Services. The experience gained will provide a basis for recommendations to be included in the report to the General Assembly.

Meetings

23. Conference Services may be able to contribute more to helping United Nations bodies to achieve their objectives if committee chairmen and bureaus are more aware of resource constraints and limits to flexibility in Conference Services and if the latter is more aware of the specific meeting objectives of intergovernmental bodies. This is particularly important in the scheduling of meetings and assignment of meeting rooms.

24. In view of the many, varied and frequently changing requirements of intergovernmental and expert bodies, scheduling is not a one-time activity limited to the preparation of the biennial calendar of conferences and meetings; it is one of the most important ongoing functions of the staff of a planning unit of Conference Services, who work closely with the substantive secretariats of intergovernmental and expert bodies, chairmen of regional groups and others concerned with meetings servicing, and on occasion with presiding officers, continuously adjusting meeting schedules and room assignments to ensure that appropriate rooms can be found for as many bodies as possible. As part of the activities to be carried out in the second phase of the study, the patterns of actual demand for meetings services will be analysed in an effort to identify measures that could reduce the level of uncertainty in planning and permit the most efficient use of scarce resources. Recommendations for improvement will be included in the report to the General Assembly.

Workflow management

25. With improved forecasting, as described above, it may be possible to revise the present methods of workflow management. During the second phase of the study, the feasibility of moving to a "short-cycle" throughput for certain categories of pre-session documents will be examined. Special measures for dealing with documents, often completely unforeseen, that require immediate processing are also being explored.

Performance measurement

26. As mentioned in paragraphs 13 to 15 and 18 above, the present measures of workload and performance are inadequate for the purposes of managing conference-servicing resources. As part of the second phase of the study, a detailed study is being carried out on the improvement of all aspects of performance measurement, including measures of quality, timeliness, efficiency, demand and costs. This study will also consider the feasibility of shifting from "workload standards" to "benchmarking for continuous improvement". On the basis of progress made, recommendations will be included in the report to the General Assembly.

Cost accounting

27. To provide the information on costs described in paragraph 19 above, the development of a cost-accounting system for conference-servicing is being considered for the second phase of the project. However, this would require additional consultancy services. It would therefore be undertaken only if authorized by the General Assembly on the basis of recommendations presented in the report.

Application of technological innovations

28. The report will include recommendations based on the work of two internal working groups previously established in the Office of Conference and Support Services dealing respectively with machine-assisted translation and with electronic documentation. In addition, it will make proposals for other applications of technology identified during the comprehensive study. Of the technology projects now being implemented by the Office of Conference and Support Services, particular emphasis will be given to the full implementation of the optical disk system (especially the extension of on-line access to all translators) and the design and establishment of standards for submitting documents in electronic form, since these appear to have the greatest potential for productivity gains.

29. Among the additional projects under consideration are the introduction of the use of pen-based technology for on-screen editing and revision and the greater use of bar-code technology for tracking work or measuring performance.

D. Human resource requirements

Objective

30. The objective of the Secretariat is to ensure the availability of staff with the necessary skills and training to provide the required services to intergovernmental bodies, and to make optimum use of such staff.

Present situation

31. Conference services are provided by a combination of staff appointed to established posts, staff recruited for temporary assignments of short duration

and providers of contractual services. To determine the optimal combination of such staff resources requires information concerning the expected demand for conference services that, as indicated above, is not readily available. The present ratio of established posts to temporary assistance resources is not necessarily optimal; the Board of External Auditors had recommended that there be less reliance upon temporary assistance, particularly non-local temporary staff. At the same time, Member States have, in the past, been reluctant to approve any increase in the number of established posts.

Proposals for improvement

32. The second phase of the comprehensive study will include several reviews related to staffing requirements for conference servicing; prior to their completion, it would be premature to present detailed recommendations. The studies described above relating to measurement of the demand for services and the productivity of staff, as well as those designed to reduce uncertainty in estimates of future demand for services and to improve workflows, will affect the level and mix of staffing requirements. In addition, the proposed development of cost-accounting systems is expected to improve the possibilities for comparisons of the cost-effectiveness of different proportions of temporary staff and contractual services. However, until a more detailed analysis of the demand for conference services has been completed as part of the second phase of the study, it would also be premature to estimate the most appropriate mix of staff resources for Conference Services. Preliminary findings and recommendations in this area will be presented in the more comprehensive report to the General Assembly.

33. It would be useful, as part of the second phase of the study, to carry out a "value-oriented" measurement of the functions and staff of Conference Services, measuring the functional use of staff to find ways to increase the value of their contribution to products and services. Value-oriented surveys would examine the use of staff time from perspectives such as the contributions to performance goals, time spent on repeat work, and the use of higher- and lower-levels skills. However, they involve specialized analytical techniques and would be beyond the capacity of the Secretariat to carry out. For this purpose the services of additional external consultants would be needed.

34. In addition to the problems of deciding upon the number of conference-servicing staff required and the most appropriate combination of established posts, temporary assistance and contractual services, the study will consider problems of ensuring that the staff is given the training needed to work efficiently and effectively; recommendations on staff training will be included in the report to the General Assembly.

E. Physical facilities

35. Although physical facilities were not specifically mentioned in the General Assembly resolution, the report will devote some attention to the problems that arise as a result of inadequate physical facilities for meetings. These include issues such as the limited number of meeting rooms at Headquarters, the lack of electronic voting machines in some large meeting rooms, the need to upgrade

sound systems and the need to reconfigure meeting rooms to meet the changing requirements of United Nations bodies.

III. CONCLUSION

36. The Committee on Conferences is invited to comment on the results of the first phase of the comprehensive study of conference services and to provide guidance for the implementation of the second phase. Its comments and recommendations will be taken fully into account by the Office of Conference and Support Services in carrying out activities in the second phase and in preparing the report on the comprehensive study of conference services to be submitted to the General Assembly at its forty-ninth session.